

Political and Feminist Vision: A Critical Reading of Githa

Hariharan's In Times of Siege

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Githa Hariharan, a leading novelist of our time is an astute observer of cultural, political and historical realities of India. Her strong social and political commitment also finds expression in her social activism. She emerges as a writer with political consciousness in her novel *In Times of Siege*. If the novelist is asked why she had to write *In Times of Siege* the answer would perhaps be similar to why she had to go to court challenging the law that a mother could not be the natural guardian of her children unless the father is dead. It was only because of Githa Hariharan that in the "*history of women's legal right in India, the court ruled that the mother would undoubtedly be the natural guardian according to the Indian Constitution.*" *¹ Similar is the way with Shiv Murthy, the hero of the Githa Hariharan's novel *In Times of Seige* who rejects the threats of fundamentalists. In fact by keeping history as the foundation of the novel the author wants to show that fundamentalism and extremism can be a major threat to academic freedom along with civil society. Hariharan has very skillfully fictionalized the theme of false nationalism, prejudiced ignorance and intellectual intolerance in the novel.

As we see in this novel, the protagonist, Dr. Shiv Murthy is a simple man, a Professor at an Open University in Delhi, Kasturba Gandhi Central University. He is in-charge of B.A History course and writes a lesson on 12th century reformer-poet Basava but a Hindu fundamentalist organization named Itihas Suraksha Manch creates controversy over his lesson. The organization accuses Shiv Murthy of

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deliberate 'distortion of history' and demands an apology for that and also asks him to revise the lesson. Dr. Murthy believes that he has only written what is true and that he won't bow down. As the members of the Manch are not ready to listen, Dr. Murthy finds himself in a dilemma. At this juncture, Meena, a 24 year old female student-activist, the daughter of a friend comes to live with him as she recovers from a knee injury. Meena stands for the author and becomes her mouthpiece. Meena asks Shiv not to be in a dilemma or in confused state and be firm in his decision not to surrender to the vandalism of the fundamentalists. Meena's motivation is like a balm to his suffering. Thus when his apology is demanded, he vehemently turns down the Head's demand for the same and refuses to make any change in the lesson on Basava. Shiv argues, "*The lesson doesn't distort history by any stretch of the imagination. And I will not apologize or explain myself to a group outside the university, a group of people we do not recognize as historians.*"(70)*² It is only because of the moral support of Meena that Shiv musters up courage to challenge the fundamentalists. Finally with great hope he decides to face the world that exploits people, after leaving his self-doubts aside.

Actually through the story of Shiv, Githa Hariharan wants to say that in a democratic country like India where constitution guarantees freedom of expression, unfortunately some fundamentalists (either Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Sikh, Christian) are making fun of this provision. This novel unfolds the present day tortured face of India where human rights are blatantly violated with silent support of some politicians and there are attacks on people who cherish secular ideas. This disturbing trend shakes the conscience of a true humanist like Hariharan: "*What makes a fanatic? A fundamentalist? What makes communities that have lived together for years suddenly discover a latent hatred for each other.?*"(129) As a matter of fact, through this novel the author is trying to find an answer to these disturbing questions. Thus when Hariharan was asked as to what prompted her to write this novel she said:

"More than inspiration, I would have to talk about compulsion. Both in India and elsewhere, we are living in times that allow less and less space for debate and dissent. As far as specific incidents are concerned, when I was midway through the novel, there was actually a case in India of two very eminent historians being attacked for their work by rightwing watchdogs. This was not so much inspiration for me as a strange parallel track taken by both the reality around me, and the fiction I was writing." *³

Shiv Murthy's history lesson invites the wrath of the fundamentalists. They call him traitor, loyal to Pakistan and Muslims. Pressure is mounted on him at all levels – political, religious and academic. He is threatened that his wife and daughter would be punished. The agitators are very aggressive. They physically destroy Shiv's room. This is how the novelist describes the scene created by these

fundamentalists: *"The tables and chairs and book shelves are broken, the wall defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open minded and shambled"* and they ultimately have made the history Professor *"a full time fugitive"*(131) just because he wrote the truth. Hariharan calls them *"blood thirsty munchies"* who *"will break and devour everything."*(135) Shiv begins to feel a sense of insecurity. His fear is artistically equated with the fear of endangered species whose natural habitat has been taken over. The novel captures the plight of common man like Shiv thrown unwittingly into political trouble. Here Hariharan exposes the fascist mind of these people who want to earn name and fame only in the name of religion. As a matter of fact, they are not protectors of religion and history rather a destroyer of history suffering from extreme intolerance and bigotry. For them history is a tool to do politics. Hariharan wants to say that such cruel and disastrous activity by the fundamentalists in the name of religion can destroy the very fabric of a plural society like India. It is a tragedy for India that persons like Shiv are becoming pawn at the hand of fundamentalists. Dr. Shiv is a dedicated history Professor who presents history candidly without any prejudice but unfortunately his liberal ideas are put to test. The fundamentalists attempt to overpower the expressed opinions of those who have excellent mental abilities.

This action of fundamentalists disturbs the academic world and creates chaos in the university campus. University staffs too are divided in two groups- Left and Right wing. This groupism destroys the peaceful atmosphere of university and makes University campus a battleground of ideas. The students are also forced to get involved into that incident. They have to issue pamphlets, leaflets etc. against the attacks of the Hindu organization. In this way, the academic environment is totally disturbed by the vandalism of the 'Fundoos'. To a question on why Githa chose the university as the scene of action, she said: *"for me the campus is not central but the outside. If in a university set up, debate, free and frank is stifled, then that shows the insidious nature of communal forces."* Replying to the question whether it does not show that academic culture and values are already atrophied and academia had already become somewhat redundant, Githa replies, *"Well, yes, I do recognize and foreground the fact that there is a return to a sense of fear, persecution and ghettoisation. There is the atrophy of intellectuality and a decline of the romantic veneration of the teacher figure"*.⁴

Githa is worried to see that even the field of education has been badly involved in the dirty game of 'fundoos'. Even scholars and elite class of society have become pawns at the hands of fundamentalists. Shiv resists injustice and faces all kinds of torture bravely. He thinks that the issue is not all about history but about the politicisation of academics. Hariharan wants to write about the lack of integrity amongst Indian academics and of the perils of being a liberal in degenerate times. Through this novel Hariharan

has shown her anger over the betrayal of the secularist vision which shaped the nation, the shrinkage of space in contemporary India for debate & dissent, for the age-long Indian tradition of co-existence and mutual respect and tolerance. Society expects from elite and learned class to bring peace and harmony but unfortunately even professors like Dr. Arya create disharmony by dividing the society on the base of caste and religion. He is in support of the fundamentalist force. Professor Murthy has to face intense political pressure that poses dangers to his life and academic career as well. Hariharan's concern for shrinking space as citizens, writers, teachers, students and rational people is reflected in this novel. She is not happy to see the present situation of India where people's mind is 'not without fear' as imagined by Tagore. It is rather 'divided by narrow domestic walls' as Tagore feared. Infact, Hariharan wants to say that we are living in times of siege. What is more shocking is that the siege is not just external- the mob or the fundamentalist or the terrorist - but within our minds. In order to put a stop to the 'siege of the mind', India's large middle educated class particularly intellectuals and scholars should come forward and speak against the fabrications of dogmatic ideologies.

By making Dr. Shiv the hero of the novel, Hariharan wants to show that an average middle class person can stand up to the threat posed by the 'Hindu Right'. The novel demands that Indian middle class should revolt against anti-democratic forces in our country as the hero rejects the threats of fundamentalists. The condition which Shiv faces can happen to anyone and as we have seen is happening with several others. Anyone can encounter a time of siege as part of her/his existence like the protagonist of the novel. Hariharan has correctly dedicated this novel to "all those who speak up in times of siege". Shiv with his secular ideology, represents those 'ordinarily educated and decent people' who are willing to speak up for the fundamental values that hold their world in place. He wants to ensure that everyone in the society can go about their business and enjoy basic freedom to think, to speak and to ask question.

In this novel along with political issue there is feminist approach also. The feminism in this novel is unique. Shiv the hero of the novel takes inspiration from Meena who is a sociology student. Hariharan represents the assertive, independent and outspoken image of contemporary woman. In her interview Hariharan has rightly pointed out: "*Meena is representative of a particular kind of young person- not the yuppie sort, but the kind of passionately engaged in the world she lives in- and wanting to change all the inequities it breeds, tolerates and promotes.*"⁵

Meena's character is a representative of today's modern woman who lives alone in the city away from their parents. Meena influenced by the Western feminism is fiercely independent. She is neither bashful nor introvert in her interaction with Shiv. At the moment of crisis it is Meena who lends her

support to Shiv Murthy to keep him sailing through the adversity of life. She induces Shiv to act, not to compromise. Meena's character belongs to the voice of woman who stands for freedom. Meena is developed as a feminist character that fights against communal forces. She is a woman, daring and confident and may be described as a champion of feminism. Her fight is against narrowness, bigotry and fanaticism. In the present novel Hariharan shows that though Shiv is the guardian of Meena but in difficult times, Meena becomes Shiv's guardian. She supports and inspires him to stand firm. Comparatively she is a better guardian. Thus, Meena's help to Shiv changes his fortune and life. Meena makes a plan to help Shiv. She suggests Shiv to call press conference to defend his aspect. Meena tells Shiv that protection racket is not new in our country. To convince people that they are under attack, then offer them protection, is a very old tradition of our country. So he need not worry and fight against it to defy the protection racket, in place of surrendering and apologizing as it will empower these types of Manchus. Meena calls them 'fundoos'. Meena represents the modern woman of the younger generation of India, who is confident and action oriented. Her view of world is shaped by radical text such as *The Politics of Hate, Onward United Action, Women's Voice and The Communalist Agenda*. Meena is an outspoken girl and she knows how to fight for her rights. Githa Hariharan owns a very creative mind through which she is all set to cause a revolution or change in the attitude of modern Indian woman. Since she writes in English, her readership may have been limited to the upper middle class educated women. But she is a socially committed writer and a true citizen with awareness of her rights.

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